TAKING AWAY THE
HEADACHE

Wohler Technologies, best known for audio and video monitoring, recently acquired Europa Australia, the technology provider for Wohler's HDDC-200A caption encoder bridge. A brilliant piece of engineering and a passionate team has catapulted the company from audio and video monitoring into moving data, as Wohler's President and CEO **Carl Dempsey** explains

I think our objective – and this is something we are passionate about - is really to become an extension of our customers' engineering group. All the broadcast environments worldwide have had drastic reductions in engineering resources but they still need to get more done. And what we do within our own niche market area which primarily up until a few months ago was only audio and video monitoring is look at what they are trying to do and help them out either with existing products, or if they need customised products and specialised software we'll do that as well. So essentially we become a part of that broadcasters' team, we get as close to them as we possibly can to take away some of their headaches.

Would the company have continued successfully if it had restricted itself to what it started off doing?
The beautiful thing about monitoring is that the protocols change. We started out 21 years ago and most of our business was analogue and two channel. Then digital came into play, initially digital audio and then digital video SDI. We were one of the first American companies to have SDI, we have a list of 'firsts' as long as your

arm - and that has made the company successful. I'd like to say that all those years ago when there were only 12 of us - now we are up to about 96 - we saw the future and we were there to meet it, but that wouldn't be true. What happened was that these different technologies, these different protocols, were taking off in different parts of the world.

In America, they were actually behind on this, primarily because their infrastructure was already built and yet a lot of European and Asian stuff had not been built, so they went with the latest. So our customer base came to us primarily from abroad – a good 45% of our business is international – and they said "Look Carl, we love your boxes, we want to continue using them but we can only do so if you offer A, B, C" which were these new protocols. Frankly, if we wanted to keep our customer base we had to deliver. When you are smaller, you can maintain a nimbleness if you have that gorilla kind of attitude. It is more difficult to maintain that attitude as the company grows, but it's very important. And that's why I take time to travel and see customers as much as I can. If I lost the connection with the real application world then I would not be much use.

Wohler is a minnow compared to companies like Thomson and Harris. Is that good or bad?

I'm actually doing work for the companies you have just mentioned, they have got an awful lot of work on their plate, and they can't get through everything. I see them as customers, even though they are potentially competitors. A great example of that is the closed-captioning where we are helping out those companies because they weren't ready for certain protocols, and the company that we have just acquired, Europa Australia, had the solution because they had been working on it for two years.

Why did you get into the closed-captioning business?

I have known Elio Deluca, who used to own Europa Australia, for 12 years and he is still with the company. Closed-captioning is a really complex issue, you have got all these different closed-caption standards worldwide. It is a real headache for if you have just built a plant and you can't pass those captions through because of a new protocol then you have got a problem, especially if closed-captioning of that standard is mandated, and this was the case in Australia. Elio Deluca came up with a great solution which means you don't have to change what you have got going on in your plant. We have just got this little card solution that will bridge around your piece of equipment.

The same card can also be converted to a transcode so it's pretty clever. One card uses one FPGA, a really powerful FPGA, and it squirts in whatever software is needed. The first work that we did outside Australia was in France, with Canal+. They had looked at all the big boys first and could not get exactly what they wanted. So they gave us a shot at this massive job, closed-captioning for about 23 different channels, and we were able to write new codes for their specific requirements. We did it from scratch, a brand-new protocol in what was a very short space of time. What Elio is doing really is moving data around, essentially insertion of data and extraction of data. And I believe, and this is the main reason why I purchased the company, with all this new data around broadcasting in the space they call EDS [Extended Data Systems], you are going to need a way of putting it in, extracting it, and also monitoring it – which is our core business. In the future, and the future is now, really, we are going to be monitoring all kinds of things and not only audio and video but data that is included within that audio and video. The new products will be really user-intuitive, many of them touch-screen, and you can get to anything you want. I am a great believer in "Start small but think big". The technology of the future is already here.

You say 45% of the business is outside the US, do you see that increasing?

In the States we are very well known, and we are also known in Australia. We have actually just started a company called Wohler Australia. You

> **The technology of the future is already here**

really have to understand the local market and as an American company, I can't do that from California. I certainly don't go in there with an American approach.

What impact of the current economic malaise are you seeing on the broadcasting industry?

Initially it was tightening up and now the budgets are shrinking. Advertising revenue is dropping, big projects are being held in abeyance. These are tough times, no question about it. But this company has been through it before. I am going to be budget careful but I am not going to batten down the hatches. This is the time when the end users need our help more than ever. It is going to last three, four or even five years.

Where do you think Wohler will be in five years' time?

We will continue to put out some very useful products, a lot more on the data side. Five years' from now, the protocols are going to change all over again. We don't want to become a massive company, I don't want to go above 150. We'll continue to invest in the engineering resource, that's the crucial thing. If we maintain our core values and that real vision where we just want to make life easier for the customer, we'll be okay. We have got great people now on our team - I love working with people who have got that kind of passion.

Carl Dempsey, thank you. ∎